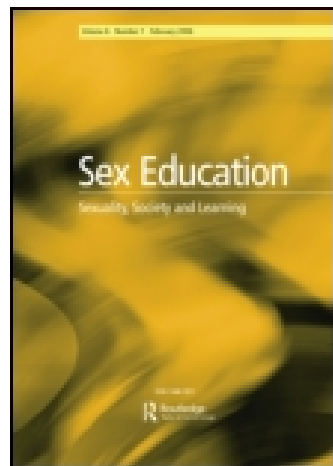




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Lesbian Cinderella and other stories: telling tales and researching sexualities equalities in primary school

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Lesbian Cinderella and other stories: telling tales and researching sexualities equalities in primary school

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This article provides a critical account of a selection of approaches that were used in the 26-month No Outsiders participatory action research project in education settings. The paper questions what challenges are presented to educators in critically exploring and challenging heteronormative sex-gender discourses. We revisit some of the tensions in undertaking a project of this kind, by exploring data episodes as vignettes to highlight the recuperative nature of heteronormativity. The paper's title originates in one of the author's dramatic persona of Cindy, a Lesbian Cinderella. We critically reflect on this creation, acknowledge Cindy's potential, and query the characters' capacity to even briefly 'trouble' heteronormative discourses in action within the classroom. Finally, we argue that pupils' multiple and shifting subjectivities, and understandings of these discourses offered by such pedagogic interventions, provides an arena for children to resist, reappropriate and challenge such figures that move beyond bounds of heteronormative sex-gender discourses.

Introduction

This article draws on a participatory action research project (the No Outsiders project) in developing work that supports sexualities equalities in the primary classroom. From September 2006 until December 2008, the No Outsiders research team¹ (consisting of 26 teacher-researchers, nine university researchers and a diversity trainer) has been exploring ways of addressing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) equalities in the context of English primary schools. This paper outlines the work of the No Outsiders project before exploring the identity discourses operating in the storybooks used in our classrooms, in our own conversations, and in the drama work engaged in with the children. Whilst we recognize that this project has had notable successes in promoting sexualities equalities by exploring and challenging homophobia and heteronormativity in the participating schools, we want to begin to rethink some of the issues in undertaking a project of this kind. We particularly focus on an exploration of how certain identities are, perhaps necessarily, privileged over others in the work we do, and the implications of this for the children in relation to the type of sexualities equalities teaching we developed in the work of this project.

This paper is written by two members of the No Outsiders team, Fin, a university-based researcher, and Laura, a primary school-based teacher-researcher. In the following pages, we reflect on the various forms the project has taken in seeking sexualities equalities, and the recuperative effects of heteronormativity in reframing and interpreting these interventions.

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Background to the project

A growing body of research over the past decade has begun to examine issues of homophobia, and how institutionalized heterosexual discourses are played out in British schools. Such research is necessitated by recent research detailing the high levels of homophobic bullying and language in UK schools (Hunt and Jenson 2007; Rivers 2004; Rivers and Cowie 2006), the longer-term negative effects of such school-based bullying on LGBT pupils (Rivers 2004) and studies observing the highly heteronormative sex–gender hierarchies that are in play from early years onwards (Epstein and Johnson 1998; Renold 2005). The No Outsiders project began in September 2006, in 14 primary schools across England. Teacher researchers involved in the No Outsiders project received a set of 25 picture books featuring non-heterosexual and/or non-gender-conforming characters, and with support from university researchers developed approaches and issues they wanted to take forward in their schools. A wide range of approaches emerged. Some teacher-researchers focused on developing policy and schemes of work to challenge gender inequality and promote sexuality equalities. Other schools used arts and drama practitioners to work in conjunction with the project books to challenge homophobic discrimination, and attempted to challenge some of the heteronormative discourses in operation in their school settings.

Often children's readings of the storybook characters presented in the project books substantially differed from the privileged readings offered by the authors and the educators, and therefore attempts at introducing sexualities equalities issues to the classroom were open to a range of complex, and sometimes contradictory, readings, as they were taken up and used by the children in ways drastically different to the initial pedagogic intent. Indeed, as Davies (1993) highlights, children have the skills to deconstruct and read against the grain within such narratives. This highlights the discourses upon which the team might draw when LGBT and queer 'identities' were presented in school settings. Such representations have potentially only limited legibility in a given setting, and the pupils may reframe them in the light of their prior knowledge, experience, the cultural and spatial context, and their perceived 'cultural intelligibility' (Butler 1990, 23) in the space of the primary school. We thus consider approaches members of the research team were able to develop in thinking further about gender/sexual identities in the classroom, and the implications of shaping such pedagogic interventions.

By exploring examples of how project texts have been used, we aim to draw out issues that pertain to the project as a whole, and which might offer insights for the development of queer(ing) pedagogies. Rather than suggesting that the examples we describe are typical, we suggest that they are emblematic of the wider concerns of the project as the team considered how to take its work forward. Here, we draw largely on two main theoretical framings from feminist poststructuralist and queer theories to explore a series of examples arising from the project. As described in *Gender trouble* (Butler 1990), the heterosexual matrix is where the binary gender system is constructed, and made intelligible through the '*compulsory practice of heterosexuality*' (Butler 1990, 151). Normative heterosexual thus creates a series of 'hierarchical binaries' that subordinate the cultural legitimacy of identities that fall outside such a matrix. Such theoretical framings can aid the analysis of how the repetition of signifying discourses uphold and reproduce the enduring sex–gender binaries and normative heterosexuality within schools.

The importance of Butler's work is in de-essentializing the naturalized categories and conceptual binaries of bodily sex, gender and sexuality that had marked earlier writings in feminism and gay and lesbian studies. Butler questions the essential 'fixity' of the gender

binary, and critically positions the binary as being reproduced via normative framings of heterosexual gender (Butler 1990, 1991, 1993, 2004). If sex and gender are produced discursively, then the ways in which sex–gender might be performed creates the scope for more fluid identifications, and an expanded repertoire beyond that suggested by a binary system. Yet the enduring hierarchical nature of fixed binary sex–gender systems are predicated and sustained through the hegemonic centrality of ‘heteronormativity’ (Ingraham 1994; Letts 1999). By heteronormativity here, we mean the systems of discourses that position sex and gender as part of a binary system, that privilege and legitimize heterosexual desire and gender, at the expense of other gendered and sexual identities (Ingraham 1994; Letts 1999). The central, compulsory nature (Rich 1980) and invisibility of heterosexuality normalizes such power relations, where non-heterosexual identities are perceived as ‘Other’.

Within this paper such theoretical work raises questions about how to analyse the discursive practice in play within primary school settings, and what sets of discourses might be drawn on and operationalized within the project texts and classroom interventions. Whilst recent queer and poststructuralist approaches have proved immensely helpful in this work, the sustained need for essential identity categories in order to make rights-based claims for social equity has been acknowledged in calls for a ‘strategic essentialism’ (Spivak 1988), and such a sentiment is perhaps echoed in Butler’s more recent work, in a tacit acknowledgement of the need for strategic use of ‘universality’ in subsequent LGBT rights work (Butler 1990, xviii).

Whilst this paper explores incidents where this enduring and recuperative nature of heteronormativity positions and privileges particular readings open to pupils and teachers alike, we remain interested in how feminist poststructuralist and queer approaches in troubling gender may work with more traditional diversity management and rights-based approaches located around ‘fixed’ and enduring identity categories. On the face of it, the enduring nature of heteronormativity could prove overwhelming. We might find ourselves pursuing momentary indications of sex–gender transgressions as ‘queer’ moments that substantially challenge heteronormative gender, and which should, therefore, be celebrated. But can these momentary incidents of sex–gender transition endure as a successful and deeper challenge to heterosexism and homophobia within schools?

Our analysis here will be divided into two main sections drawing on data episodes from our reflections, web postings, focused discussions and classroom observations. Firstly, we examine the ways in which our attempts to introduce LGBT equalities to the classroom can potentially ‘misfire’ when readings privileged by practitioners/academic researchers of the texts differ substantially from those of the children we teach. Derrida’s (1982) meditation on Austin’s theory of performative elements of speech highlights the potential for slippages between the production, and the audience’s response and readings in the recontextualization of the performative. Such works on the processes of signification have proved immensely helpful in thinking through how children may engage in the discourses in action within the project texts, and the political potential within such slippages (Butler 1997; Youdell 2006).

Finally, we consider the dramatic persona of Cindy (a lesbian Cinderella character), created by Laura, one of the authors. We take up here the implications of the specific discourses drawn upon in the project, this time in particular relation to teachers’ own performances of sex–gender subjectivities, and we consider alternative possibilities for future classroom practice of critically engaging with gendered and sexualities inequalities.

Sssh! Don't talk about sex

Throughout this project there has been an acknowledgement of the significant tensions between discourses of childhood and sexuality (Youdell 2007; Allen et al. 2008; Atkinson and DePalma 2008). Such competing discourses impact on the negotiation of *what* and *how* one might (re)visit the area of LGBT equalities within the primary classroom, with the first barrier being the reluctance to engage with the subject area at all. Indeed, within the United Kingdom, from Section 28² onwards there has been an apparent aversion from government level downwards to exploring issues of sexuality, and especially same-sex desire within schools. Previous research has identified the already burgeoning discourses deployed by children around gendered and sexualized identities in play within primary schools (Davies 1993; Epstein and Johnson 1998; Francis 1998; Epstein, O'Flynn, and Telford 2003; Blaise 2005; Renold 2005) demonstrating that children have strong, culturally embedded, discursively constructed notions of themselves as gendered and sexualized beings from an early age.

Yet engagement with young children around issues of sexuality remains fraught with concern (Weems 1994; Epstein 1999; Renold 2005), springing largely from the romantic notion of the innocent and non-sexual child as created through the vast wealth of discussion within public life about children needing to be protected from unwanted sexual advances and desires. This very notion of an innocent, non-sexual child gives rise to a discourse of protection, which in turn reinforces discourses of innocence. In such a climate, talking about sexuality, and particularly homosexuality, in elementary (primary) school can be viewed as especially risky and unsafe (Bickmore 1999). However, as Bickmore (1999) argues, it is young children's size in addition to their relative lack of power and knowledge, rather than 'innocence', which forms the basis of children's vulnerability. This 'lack', she argues, negates children's rights to self determination in their transition to full citizenship (Bickmore 1999, 21).

This protection from discourses of sex and desire permeates the storybooks used in this project. The obsession with desire as inappropriate territory for childhood and the construction of the 'innocent' child could potentially blunt the need to unpick taken-for-granted discourses around love and romance. Such romantic discourses structure the narratives of many of the project texts, from the romance between the two princes in *King and king* (De Haan and Nijland 2002) to the core of the loving, nuclear family of penguins in *And Tango makes three* (Parnell and Richardson 2005). Yet, whilst this might suggest a closing down of potential depictions of a range of possibilities queer 'livable lives' (Butler 1990, xxviii), we suggest that children retain the capacity to question and deconstruct texts and open up new meanings, which may be potentially oppositional to those privileged by the class teacher and/or author. Although we underline the capacity for pedagogues to privilege set, 'official' readings, educators might also interrogate the meaning making behind the texts. Indeed, as scholars (Britzman 1995; Blaise 2005; Sears 1999) argue, educators can work from a queer perspective, and seek new ways 'to challenge categorical thinking, promote interpersonal intelligence, and foster critical consciousness' (Sears 1999, 5).

In some cases this can mean a recuperation of any queer potential back into dominant heteronormative readings. Such instances can provide ways of exploring how the intersectionality of a child's gendered, 'raced' and classed experiences shape their readings, in addition to assisting the research team in thinking about how such interventions may be instigated within primary classrooms. Subsequently, we want to trouble the construction of pupils as necessarily 'unknowing', and suggest that children

may have a wide range of responses to and readings of the project texts and interventions. We consider how children's ways of knowing may have a bearing on attempts to challenge the pervasiveness of heteronormativity by drawing on some key examples from the project data.

The sissy duckling is a pimp: alternate readings and interpretations

Each project school's resource pack incorporated 25 storybooks, which included lesbian and gay characters, non-gender-conforming characters and same-sex parents, and other picture books exploring various 'differences' in characters and family structures. One of the more popular texts, *King and king* (De Haan and Nijland 2002) tells the fairytale romance of a prince who rejects all the potential brides brought before him before settling on one of the princess' brothers. Another popular text, *And Tango makes three* (Parnell and Richardson 2005), tells the ('true') story of a pair of male penguins in a US zoo, who raise a chick from an abandoned egg. Such texts provide a romantic escape, where monogamous love and the nuclear family remain upheld as the ideal. Despite the characterization featuring, in both these cases, same-sex love, the construction of the nuclear family is enduring and seemingly impervious to feminist criticism from the 1970s onwards.

Despite such relatively conservative narratives, the following work in one school included using the text *And Tango makes three* as a base for the production and staging of a libretto, and engaged children in wider debates. Such further work created space to interrogate some of the discourse in play within the narrative. Supported by their teacher, these 10-year-old to 11-year-old pupils were keen to think through the wider societal reactions to the 'gay' penguin dads. Through classroom discussions facilitated by their teacher, pupils expanded the repertoire of characters in the book to explore various themes that arose, including the diversity of family structure, relationships and identities in the zoo. In the adaptation of the story, children included adopted, intergenerational, same-sex and single-parent families.

Indeed, the children in these planning sessions showed sophisticated understandings of the complexity and temporal nature of romantic relationships; for instance, in naming other identities that were not clearly apparent in the original text. For example, in one session a pupil, unprompted, suggested the inclusion of a bisexual character, bringing new insights and characterization that did not exist in the original book. Indeed, a 'real-life' postscript to the Roy and Silo romance would include the dissolving of the partnership, and the subsequent partnering of one of the penguins with a female bird. Although the development of the libretto worked within a largely rights-based diversity management approach in exploring identities, relationships and the family, it might be suggested that, through such work, the teacher and pupils unpacked some of the heteronormative discourses in operation in common with Mindy Blaise's (2005) ideas on how one might 'queer' the early years classroom. Such an example provides a way of moving between rights-based discourses and fixed subjectivities, to the complexity and flow of 'queer'.

Other picture books have proved less popular within some of the school contexts. One of these books that faced an earlier furore in the United States is a text called *Daddy's roommate* (Willhaite 1991). This book tells the story of a boy whose father goes to live with his new boyfriend after his parent's divorce. Despite the book's arguably dated illustrations, it shows affection between the two men, including illustrations of them lying in bed, hugging and sunbathing on the beach. On other pages the men are clearly seen to argue, and a depiction of a fully realized relationship emerges. Yet the very depiction of the

two men sharing a bed created some concerns that the text was 'too smutty'. Indeed, as one teacher-researcher's colleague commented:

I was decidedly uncomfortable reading this book. The illustrations were off-putting, particularly the older man who was portrayed as a 'stereotypical gay'. As a parent I would object to this book being read to my child by anyone other than myself. This book may be useful in a specific situation but too 'smutty' for general use. (Extract from teacher-researcher's project website posting, quoting colleagues' responses to the project books)

Here, we have an 'adult' parental response to a text that is aimed at children. Yet, it is clear throughout this project that there can be disparities between the readings by the adults in the project and the children in the participant schools. In the case of *Daddy's roommate*, the 'smutty' reading of the text privileged by the adult created a situation where such texts would be less likely to be used within schools.

The privileging of particular narratives might also occur where an official narrative misfires, or is read in a drastically different way by the audience. Such metanarratives are always in action around the production and consumption of such texts. Such tensions might emerge not just from the wish to 'protect' children from potentially 'smutty' books, but also from the belief that the set of cultural connotations open to adults as teachers and parents would also be culturally intelligible to the children. Indeed, this 'censoring' of such signifiers in the project books was noticeable in the relatively chaste illustrations, such as a love heart obscuring the princes' kiss at the end of *King & king*. In one of the project's few UK texts, *Spacegirl pukes* (Watson and Carter 2006), the two mummies are shown in bed together, but any potential romance is undercut by the inclusion of sick buckets, an ill child and a puking cat. However, we will go on to suggest that pupils remain capable of adopting, rejecting, reappropriating, resisting and constructing meaning and gendered and sexualized identities from these books.

Much prior work within the field of literary analysis has explored reader response as key to meaning-making and the active exercise of reading (Iser 1978, 1980; Crosman 1980). The notion of a gap between the telling of the story and the comprehension by the reader is employed by Wolfgang Iser (1978) to examine the asymmetry in meaning between text and reader, and the spaces between words, lines and – in the case of these storybooks – pictures, where meanings are made and the text is understood. Similarly, education and cultural studies work by poststructuralist feminist and queer education scholars has suggested that children can and should be able to construct counter-normative and critical perspectives within 'heterosexualised' classrooms (Davies 1993; Sears 1999; Blaise 2005). The children's understandings of these project texts are thus a complex intersubjective process, passing through prisms of gender, sexuality, class, 'race', generation and experience. What is thus legible and intelligible to the books' audiences may vary extensively. Whatever the 'official' narratives of the authors, publishers and teachers, children retain the potential to read against the grain, thus there can be 'queer' readings of 'straight' texts, and 'straight' readings of 'queer' texts. Pupils' capacity for reappropriation and reimagining the plot and characterizations within these books highlights that there can never be one 'set' reading of any given narrative.

Such alternative readings can recuperate normative heterosexuality into the 'queerest' of tales. Take, for example, *The sissy duckling* (Fierstein and Cole 2002), which is the story of a small bird, Elmer, who feels different because of his interest in fashion, cooking and his dislike of rough sports. On the front cover, the sissy duckling is depicted with a pair of snazzy sunglasses and a fancy coat. This text was used by several project teachers as a way of challenging heteronormative masculinity. *The sissy duckling* is written by gay actor and activist Harvey Fierstein, who with an apparent knowing wink to the adult reader

depicts a portrait of gay icon Ethel Merman hanging in the sissy duckling's home. The subtlety of the cultural reference may be lost for those outside 'gay' culture. However, the children have another set of outside discourses from which to draw.

Indeed, on one of her classroom observations, Fin sat amongst a small group of pupils who were taking inspiration from picture books to create a display in the school assembly hall. Initially, one lad selected *The sissy duckling*. His reading of the text however, took a radically different hue to the one privileged by the teacher:

The boy on my left was leafing through the books. One of the project books, *The Sissy Duckling*, was in front of him. 'I'm gonna draw him' the lad said pointing at the flamboyantly dressed sissy duck on the front cover.

'Oh', I said, 'have you read the book?' He shook his head, and proclaimed, pointing at the picture of the sissy duck, 'He's a real pimp'.

I was surprised to hear the term, 'pimp' used here and I enquired, 'What do you mean "pimp"?'.

The boy replied 'You know, he gets all the girls'.

A girl from the other side of the table joined in, "You know 'pimp my ride'." (Extract from Fin's fieldnotes, 3 October 2007)

This extract is interesting for a number of reasons, in helping to think through how the privileged 'official' narratives differ from the children's own understandings. In the MTV-produced show *Pimp my Ride*, the hosts take a beat-up car (ride) and transform (pimp) it, with an engineering and stylistic make over. To 'pimp' in this cultural context means to 'make flashy' in an ostentatious public display of wealth. Within the set of cultural discourses open to the children, the sissy duckling cannot be read as a gender-transgressive character within the heteronormative space of the primary school classroom.

The 'racialised' discourse of hypermasculine 'coolness' of the sissy duckling as a 'pimp', as heterosexually desirable and successful, somewhat blunted Fin's initial reading of the duck as a strong characterization of a potentially feminized lead character. The children read the duck's apparent love of fashion and flamboyant style within a heterosexual matrix, which privileges the flashy as supporting rather than detracting from his heterosexual masculinity. Sissy Duckling becomes a dandy, a sexually successful adventurer, as the notion of him as effete and despised falls outside these pupils' understandings. Although probably available in the children's cultural reference points, the notion of 'pimp' was not articulated in this context as one that was associated with the trafficking of women or profiting from the sex trade. Such silent readings of 'pimp' may have been too difficult for the children to access or articulate in this setting.

In order to make the duck as a hero legible, he is thus pulled back within their world view, and as such emerges as a jack-the-lad, successful with the ladies in a class-specific and 'racialised' version of an acceptable 'cool' form of heterosexual masculinity accessible to these children's readings. He is recuperated and made legible again through the endurance of the heteronormative imaginary, in so much as it is beyond these children's comprehension that the sissy duck might be 'gay' and the hero of the book. It was not clear to Fin whether this boy had actually read the text in the past, yet his cursory observations of the illustrated front cover highlights the importance of visual depictions and cover art to the children's readings.

Similar tensions marked teachers' and children's readings on other occasions. For instance, one teacher voiced his concerns at reading the Danish book *Hello sailor* (Sollie and Godon 2004) to his Year Two children (aged five to six years), due to his own memories of arguably homophobic 1970s British television humour. Such a generationally specific pop-cultural reference escaped the children, who saw the story as a buddy story,

highlighting the ties of friendship between the sailors. The difference between adult and child culturally defined interpretations is illustrated by this excerpt from an interview with one of the teacher-researchers:

Teacher-researcher: ... it's made me look at the things that I project onto the kids ... Like I initially had concerns about reading *Hello Sailor*. But yeah, that's really I suppose what the project has brought out in me that it's my issues that I have to look at about what reading stories like *Hello Sailor* where the kids are going to be outraged that it's two men and all those sort of things rather than see in it as a strong, loving friendship.

Fin: Can you tell me a little bit more about what your readings of it may be and what the pupils' readings were?

Teacher-researcher: Well, mine, I mean, you know, I was brought up on Dick Emery and all that kind of stuff and *Hello Sailor* is something completely different. ... I mean it's a Danish book or it's a translation or something like that ... where obviously, you know, it's just *Hello Sailor* ... but you know the kids didn't see Matt and the Sailor as being gay, they just saw them as being two good friends. And as I am reading the book I am getting more and more 'ooooh, we are going to get some reaction about this'. But there was no reaction whatsoever, it was a lovely story and the kids loved it and that was it. (Focus discussion between teacher-researcher and Fin, November 2007)

As with *The sissy duckling*, the potential gay subtext of *Hello sailor* and *And Tango makes three* does not appear to be initially apparent to the pupils. However, it may not be the case that notions of same-sex desire and love as signified by these project texts are unknowable, but rather 'unintelligible' (Butler 1990) and 'unspeakable' (Allan et al. 2008) by students in the primary classroom. After all, the children displayed a 'knowingness' about heterosexual relationships in their discussion of the sissy (pimp) duckling. The teacher-researcher interviewed states that his pupils read the sailors as 'just good friends'. The given identities of the penguins as parents also obscure their potential sexual identity. The very idea of same-sex love, desire and romance is rendered invisible, and the potentially transgressive stories of cohabiting sailors and egg-rearing male penguins are recuperated into unchallenging tales of chaste friendship.

Despite our reservations about the limits of how these texts may be used within classrooms, children still retain the capacity for 'queer' readings of these project texts further. Whilst we have highlighted some of the limitations of the texts, and how even queer approaches may be recuperated within heteronormativity, occasionally there were glimpses of children deconstructing and thinking beyond the text, and thus opening up further queer possibilities.

Finally, we want to turn to a piece of original drama and narrative work by one of the co-authors of this article, Laura – the development of a character who has come to be known as Lesbian Cinderella. Whilst Lesbian Cinderella has been visited and made the feature of a number of papers that have emerged out of this project (Atkinson and DePalma 2008; Allan et al. 2008), we think it is worth while revisiting in order to scope out the limitations of intelligible readings of Cinderella, away from our initial celebratory enthusiasm.

Lesbian Cinderella: fairytales and queering the classroom

This section turns from the project books to consider an intervention from one of the paper's authors, Laura, in her Year Three classroom (aged seven to eight years).

We feel this is an important way of thinking through some of the contradictions and tensions in trying to form a queer(ing) pedagogic praxis in an everyday practice setting. As part of a unit of work on alternative fairytales, Laura created a modern-day Cinderella character who was a lesbian named Cindy. Prior to this work, the children had read various alternative fairytales including the aforementioned *King and king*, and had engaged in role-play and discussion around the issues raised in the texts. The children were asked to write their own alternative fairytale that changed Cinderella in some way (it could, for example, be her ethnicity, her gender or her sexuality), and so Cindy was a way of demonstrating to the children ways in which they might alter their Cinderella character.

This intervention was influenced directly for Laura by Freirian-influenced pedagogy (Freire 1972; hooks 1994) as well as queer and post-structuralist theoretical work, and highlights how such blended approaches can shape classroom practice directly. Such an approach has obvious parallels in the earlier work of Davies (1993) with the poststructuralist feminist analysis of school children's written texts. However, in this alternative fairytale work, the creation of a such a character as a lesbian Cinderella became fraught with tensions between the need to claim and 'fix' a sexual identity via the use of strategic essentialism (Spivak 1988) and a wider queer and feminist poststructuralist politics as a means to address sexualities equalities in the classroom.

On the day when Laura decided to use the dramatic persona of Cindy, she began the lesson with the usual phonics work before making her excuses and leaving the classroom. She soon reappeared from the photocopying cupboard dressed in character, wearing a sparkly wig, a leather jacket and boots. Cindy introduced herself to the class and retold the story of Cinderella to them, in role as Cindy. Much of the plot of the traditional fairytale remained intact in this retelling, but Cindy altered certain key parts of the story. This version of Cindy lived in a flat and had to do all the cleaning whilst her stepsisters watched television. The sisters were invited to a ball but Cindy did not want to go because she refused to dress up like her sisters. However, she was frustrated at staying at home. Later in the story a fairy godfather appeared and changed her tracksuit into the clothes she was wearing to talk to the class, changed her pet budgie into a motorbike and sent her in the direction of a house party down the road, with the proviso she must return at midnight or everything will change back to what it was. Cindy had a brilliant time at the party and danced with a girl there. At midnight, she had to rush off and left one of her boots behind. The girl she danced with came to look for her and eventually found her. They moved away to go to university and lived mostly happily ever after.

After Laura narrated this story to the assembled class, the children hotseated Cindy. This is a technique where a person takes the role of a character in a text and others ask them questions:

And then I let the kids hotseat me. And ask me questions which they ... Oh, I showed them this picture of this supposed girl that I'd fallen in love with at the party, on the interactive whiteboard. And so they were asking, you know, 'Did you really love her?' 'Did you get married to her?' Oh, they were asking me things about the budgie, and things about how fast the motorbike went, and you know, all sorts of questions. And then, and then I kind of said, 'Goodbye,' to them and went into the photocopying room and got changed. (Extract from interview between Laura and Fin, 2007)

The children asked lots of questions, including 'What kind of dancing do you do?', 'Are you really a lesbian?', 'Is that really your girlfriend?', 'Did you get married?'. Such questions highlight the children's interests in the heterosexual world of love and romance, and the authenticity of this same-sex relationship. Laura answered these questions in role, although she felt as though she was in risky territory as a not-out lesbian teacher

performing in role as a lesbian story character. For Laura, the process of becoming and performing the character of Cindy was problematic, as she reflected on the project website discussion forum:

I found it difficult to decide what kind of Cinderella I would be. I didn't want to be completely feminine because the children see loads of very feminine fairy tale characters all the time and yet they also seem to think that all lesbians look like men so I wanted to challenge that in them too. So I decided to be definitely female but not pink and pretty. I wore boots and a sparkly wig and a skirt and a leather jacket. (Laura, web posting)

Here, Laura is drawing on discourses relating to ways of performing non-heterosexual femininities. This nuanced reading Laura gave of the character she created may not have been fully available to the children. The decisions Laura made to have her character not wear trousers but to not be 'pink and pretty' either may not have immediately offered an alternative way of doing non-heterosexual femininity, because the children's ideas about this were not necessarily fixed or homogeneous. As reported in an earlier article (Allan et al. 2008), Laura voiced a need for tentative care when discussing her use of Cinderella in the classroom, and felt strongly that this alternate Cinderella, in herself, was 'not enough' to fundamentally queer the classroom.

Yes, Cindy did come and share a classroom with them for a little while and they interacted with her and she obviously challenged some of them who assumed she was straight but then she went away. The episode, perhaps, hinted at a different way to perform gender and sexuality and presented the children with an alternative they'd not considered and I think this, combined with other things we have done, is all contributing to them developing different understandings but, in itself, it's not enough. (Laura, web posting)

The children engaged well in the performance given by their teacher. For Laura, as the teacher, the process was both 'fun' and 'scary' as she enjoyed the engagement of the children in this piece of drama, and yet remained acutely aware of the blurred lines between her identity as the class teacher and of Cindy. Indeed, as acknowledged earlier, the construction of the character of Cindy drew on cultural discourses that potentially could be read by the pupils in a variety of ways through the symbolic references she offers, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Frisson rippled through the classroom when Cindy occupied it, and there was recognition from both the children and Laura that 'Are you really gay?' was a dangerous question. When Cindy/Laura answered the question in the affirmative, she explicitly introduced a non-straight identity into the classroom. In the moment of the performance, Laura felt that something had 'shifted'. Yet, this subversion of the heterosexual norm, this danger, this opening up of identity categories was fleeting, and Cindy was rapidly recuperated into the invasive fabric of 'heteronormativity' that pervades everyday life in primary school.

Whilst Laura privileged Cindy's non-(hetero)sexuality in her reading of the character she created, this reading was not enduring for the children. Later, the class created their own versions of fairytales, but they were very reluctant to deviate from conventionally heterosexually desirable heroes. The children who did choose to have same-sex characters were not necessarily drawing on Laura's notions of a livable, if fictional, 'gay' identity. For some children, the love interest and romance was replaced by a chiefly platonic friendship between the protagonists. Other children seemed to be reproducing the model Laura had shown them for an alternative Cinderella story, and could tell her little about the choices they had made nor the reasoning behind them. The children needed more than Cindy to allow them to step, or indeed think, outside the heterosexual matrix.

Cindy/Laura's professional, personal and fantasy identities are entwined in this enactment. For example, the children eagerly quizzed Cindy/Laura around the authenticity

and 'reality' of this depiction. They wished to 'fix' the teacher's identity; yet they remained aware that she was performing both teacher and fairytale character at different points in the lesson. This slippage between the presumed asexual/heterosexual primary class teacher, and the desiring and desired lesbian Cindy, destabilized, albeit temporally and fictionally, ideas of the personal/private and professional identities in play. The curiosity of *who* the real Cindy or teacher was became an enduring theme in this particular exchange. The children were keen to 'fix' the identity of their teacher, and wished to know whether she might once again transform into a fairytale character next time she ventured near the photocopying cupboard.

... they were really curious about whether it was me or not. Whether Cindy had really been real. ... and they were saying, 'Well, your face is the same.' I said, 'No! It was nothing to do with me.' ... But they still talk about her. Now, 'When's Cindy coming back? Can we see her again?' ... (Interview, Laura and Fin)

As Cindy/Laura confirmed that 'she has a girlfriend', Laura as a classroom teacher identified a romantic and sexual possibility for herself that melded the personal and professional. The ways in which romantic, monogamous notions of attraction are upheld throughout the Cindy narrative, paralleling the story of Cinderella with which the children were familiar, made Cindy an intelligible subject in that classroom. Her romantic interest may not have been heterosexual, but it was perhaps made possible by the fact that it conformed to understood constructions of romantic love.

Cindy could perhaps venture briefly into the classroom safely because she was *so* different from the everyday legibility of a classroom teacher in the 'heterosexual' space of the classroom. Her sparkly wig and aspects of her narrative which mirrored that of the Cinderella text (such as her budgie being turned into a motorbike, and a fairy godfather turning her tracksuit top into a leather jacket) made her clearly fictional. Such a performance provides us with the opportunity to depict different ways of doing gender and sexuality, and yet it is precisely the transient nature of this performance, and the fact that the performers return to their previous selves, that makes it a limiting strategy to use in relation to developing queer pedagogies. Cindy enters the classroom for no more than 20 minutes, demanded that the children engage with the idea that two women can fall in love, and then, beyond the fabric of this brief intervention, morphed back into the pupils' classroom teacher.

Perhaps in this 'brief carnivalistic burst' (Atkinson and DePalma 2008) a residue remains, and even temporarily normative sex–gender identities might be troubled? The fantastical nature of the teacher's transformation into Cindy may still do little to unpick the children's everyday understanding of sex–gender hierarchical norms, but did perhaps create a brief temporal space where Cindy/Laura could 'tell' the children about her fantasy girlfriend, and utter the previously 'unspeakable' affirmation that she could be 'gay' in the primary classroom.

Conclusions and some implications for practice

In this final section, we want to tease out some of the potential implications for theory and practice. In this paper we have outlined some of the limitations and tensions in unpacking ways of promoting LGBT equalities in primary schools using the project texts and pedagogical strategies of narrative and dramatization. This is a first step in a much larger journey in developing and promoting this work further. We strive not to find a 'good practice' approach to promoting sexualities equalities within the classroom, but explore some of the approaches that have been used within settings and the consequences of these

interventions. The pervasiveness of heteronormativity, heterosexism and homophobia in place within many school settings may prove impervious to wider initial attempts at critical challenge through pedagogic interventions.

'Speaking the unspeakable' (Allan et al. 2008) within primary schools by talking about sexual and gendered identities openly in the classroom can begin to open up how such identities may be rendered legible to the children, including those with LGBT parents. Whilst the resource books are useful tools in exploring sex–gender identities and family structures, there is a need for wider, more inclusive texts that are comprehensible to children. These texts may explicitly locate characters as lesbian, gay, bi or trans, yet such characters' gender–sexual identities may be incidental to the plot. Indeed, it may be more useful to embed such characters in a range of storybooks, rather than specifically gay social texts with perceived potentially 'worthy' narratives (Epstein 1999). As previous scholars have noted (Thorne 1993; Epstein and Johnson 1998; Epstein 1999; Renold 2005), primary schools are awash with these everyday transgressions, yet whether one might claim and hold onto them in subverting and challenging heteronormative sex–gender hierarchies in intent and effect may be somewhat dubious. Whilst it is understandable that small moments of success might be seized on and rightly celebrated, there remains a need to explore the pervasiveness of heteronormativity, and how children will read and recuperate the projects' resources within narratives that are legible and open to them.

Thus, *The sissy duckling* is a story about a duck who is flamboyant, and still recognizable as masculine. In 'getting all of the girls', he is actively heterosexual. Lesbian Cinderella still does not necessarily largely trouble the presumed heterosexuality of non-fairytale 'real-life' adults within their school communities.

Following earlier feminist poststructuralist work (Davies 1993; Sears 1999; Blaise 2005), one tactic to consider is to equip children with the ability to deconstruct narratives and subjectivities with classmates and teachers, and to question the privileging and silencing of 'other' discursive subjectivities. This 'risky teaching' (Sears 1999) is about questioning heterosexual assumptions; it is about working with children to write and read against the grain, share opinions and views, and open up sites of dissensus within the classroom (Davies 1993), and to imagine 'queer possibilities in the early childhood classroom' (Blaise 2005, 185). Such an imagining includes challenging categorical ways of thinking about gender, supporting children's interpersonal skills and unpacking discursive practices with pupils. Beyond this, there are clear areas for fruitful ethnographic enquiry in exploring children's reactions to the use of these interventions in the classroom and elsewhere, in working towards the creation of responsive critical pedagogies within primary schools that reflect the intersectionality of pupils' subjectivities. This is not to suggest such a task is easy or straightforward. Indeed, in the highly competitive, neo-liberal, English primary school, many teachers may question how they may take such an experimental approach within their work.

Such work may be immensely challenging, moving as it does to create dialogue between educators, parents and children in thinking of ways of maintaining gender and sexuality equality in curriculum and resources, and seeking space to unpack dominant gendered and sexuality discourses at large within school.

The No Outsiders project has drawn on theoretical work from critical pedagogic traditions as well as more recent work using feminist poststructuralist and queer theories. This can prove an uneasy fit. Indeed, as Pascoe (2007) has suggested, translating poststructuralist-influenced work to the classroom can sometimes be fraught. Yet, there remains a desire to challenge social inequalities, acknowledge the slipperiness of everyday practice, and maintain a wish to recognize the recuperating effect and invisibility

of dominant discourses of heteronormativity within schools. Such work necessitates a strategic deployment of the resources at hand to complicate and think through dominant, normative sex–gender discourses in play within the project text and classroom, to enable practitioners to actively and critically reflect on such discourses in developing classroom and school-based practices that interrogate such regulatory practices that continue to underpin heteronormativity in school (Coffey and Delamont 2000).

We do not want to conclude this paper dismayed at the limits of our initial endeavour. Rather, we want to suggest that it is through momentary dialogue, negotiation and the opening up of sex and gender categories to children's understandings that pedagogies which trouble heteronormative binaries may be developed. Much of what has transpired on a personal, project and political level over the course of the past two years has buoyed our enthusiasm in attempting to realize a praxis that draws on the potential in queer and feminist theories, poststructuralist politics, and critical pedagogy to seek 'transformation' within the classroom and beyond.

Notes

1. For more information about the No Outsiders project, see www.nooutsiders.sunderland.ac.uk.
2. The now repealed Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 stated that a local authority should not 'promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'.

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